

## “CHANGING MEANINGS: THE ROLE OF SOCIETY IN INFLUENCING SEMANTIC SHIFTS IN ENGLISH”

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### **Annotation**

This article examines the phenomenon of semantic change in the English language, focusing on the role of social influences in driving shifts in word meanings. By analyzing how movements, digital culture, and technological advancements shape language, the study highlights how English evolves in response to societal shifts. Drawing on works by influential linguists and authors such as Raymond Williams, George Orwell, and David Crystal, the article discusses key examples of words that have taken on new connotations in alignment with modern social values. Through these examples, the article illustrates how social forces not only introduce new vocabulary but also repurpose existing words to meet the expressive needs of each generation. Ultimately, this exploration underscores the adaptability of language as a reflection of cultural change, showing how English remains resilient and relevant in an ever-evolving world.

**Key words:** *semantic change, language evolution, societal influence, language shift, cultural impact, technological influence, lexical change, communication, language and society, ai in language.*

### **Introduction**

In the ever-evolving landscape of language, words are more than just static symbols; they are dynamic reflections of society's shifting values, technologies, and cultural norms. The English language, in particular, has undergone substantial transformations, with word meanings adapting and expanding in response to societal changes. From the influence of new technology on slang to the impact of social movements on the lexicon, the forces of modern life continue to shape and redefine language in powerful ways.

Semantic change—alterations in the meanings of words over time—has occurred throughout history, but today's globalized and digitally connected world is accelerating these shifts. For instance, words like "network," once rooted in physical connections,

now carry digital connotations, while terms like "woke" and "cancel" have developed nuanced layers beyond their original definitions. Understanding these changes is not only crucial for linguists and language learners but also offers insights into the cultural and technological forces that drive our society.

This article explores how societal forces contribute to semantic change within English, examining specific examples to illuminate the broader impacts of social influence on language. Through this lens, we gain a deeper appreciation of how words evolve to meet the demands of a changing world.

### **How society drives semantic change in the English language**

Language evolves constantly, responding to the shifts and currents of the societies in which it is spoken. English, one of the world's most widely spoken languages, exemplifies this phenomenon vividly. Semantic change—the shift in meanings of words over time—illustrates how language responds to societal transformations, adopting new nuances to reflect changing values, perspectives, and cultural practices. Many authors and linguists have explored the mechanisms behind semantic shifts, identifying how social forces directly shape and redefine language. The evolution of words like "cool," "woke," and "virus," among many others, highlights the undeniable impact of social influences on the English lexicon.

One of the most notable aspects of semantic change is the process of amelioration and pejoration, where words acquire more positive or negative connotations, respectively. Raymond Williams, in his landmark work *Keywords* (1976), explored how words like "culture" and "democracy" shifted meanings over centuries as societies reinterpreted and reassigned value to them. For instance, Williams noted that "culture" once strictly referenced cultivation and growth but transformed into a broader concept encompassing arts, customs, and knowledge. The societal shift towards valuing intellectual and artistic pursuits in the 19th century expanded "culture's" meaning to align with evolving social priorities. Similarly, other words—such as "democracy"—took on more complex meanings with the rise of political movements advocating for equality and representation. This demonstrates how social aspirations for rights and identity leave a lasting mark on language.

Social movements also accelerate semantic shifts by reshaping existing words or introducing entirely new terms to express emerging ideas. George Orwell observed this phenomenon in his 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," where he argued that political movements shape language to reflect power dynamics, often influencing words to carry ideological weight. A contemporary example is "woke." Initially a term denoting awareness of social injustice, it has expanded to describe a mindset of heightened social consciousness. This shift reflects society's increasing focus on issues

like race, equality, and activism, with “woke” becoming a loaded term both embraced and critiqued. Similarly, “cancel,” a word with roots in annulment or invalidation, has taken on a broader connotation in popular culture, reflecting the public’s desire to hold individuals accountable in social and political contexts. These shifts show how social priorities directly alter word meanings, providing linguistic tools for complex societal phenomena.

Technology, as a pillar of modern society, has also had profound implications on semantic change. Words like “cloud,” “virus,” and “troll” have acquired new meanings, driven by technological advancements and digital culture. “Cloud,” once referring solely to a natural phenomenon, now also denotes a method of storing digital data—a concept that has become indispensable in modern society. Linguist David Crystal in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (1995) highlights how digital terms influence language evolution, especially as social contexts redefine once straightforward terms. In today’s world, “virus” now commonly refers to a digital threat, reflecting society’s reliance on and vulnerability to technology. As these words morph in meaning, they illustrate how societal dependencies and technological advancements redefine language.

Beyond words influenced by technology and social movements, the lexicon of English has also absorbed terms from other languages and cultures, reshaping their meanings within an English-speaking context. For example, “guru” was originally a Sanskrit term for a spiritual teacher but has shifted in English to denote an expert or authority in any field. The changing use of “guru” highlights how English adapts foreign terms to meet its speakers’ evolving needs, emphasizing the language’s capacity for flexibility and adaptability. Author H.L. Mencken discussed this trend in *The American Language* (1919), explaining how English continually borrows and reinterprets foreign words, thus reinforcing the profound influence of cultural and social interchanges on semantic change.

In recent years, social media platforms have accelerated semantic shifts in unprecedented ways. Phrases like “flex,” “tea,” and “ghosting” have evolved rapidly through platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, where users repurpose words to suit new social dynamics. For instance, “flex,” which traditionally referred to physical strength, now connotes the act of flaunting one’s success or material possessions. Similarly, “tea” has shifted from a beverage to mean “gossip,” capturing the sharing of information in an increasingly public and immediate manner. The term “ghosting,” which once only referred to the idea of invisibility, now denotes the act of abruptly cutting off communication in a digital context. Linguists like Gretchen McCulloch, in her book *Because Internet* (2019), explore how the internet reshapes



language and highlights the role of online platforms in spreading new meanings across vast audiences almost instantaneously.

Ultimately, the power of social influences in driving semantic change cannot be understated. Authors like Raymond Williams, George Orwell, and David Crystal provide frameworks for understanding how society shapes language. Words serve as cultural mirrors, reflecting societal values, technological advancements, and collective aspirations. This relationship between society and language underscores the importance of semantic change as a mechanism through which language evolves to meet new communicative demands. By examining how social forces shape word meanings, we gain insight into how language functions as both a tool for expression and a record of collective human experience. The dynamic nature of English, as it continues to respond to the shifting tides of society, illustrates the language's adaptability and resilience, ensuring its relevance across generations.

### Conclusion

The dynamic relationship between society and language is evident in the ways that words shift in meaning, responding to cultural values, technological advancements, and global exchanges. Semantic change reflects the adaptability of language to meet the expressive needs of each generation, providing words with new nuances and meanings that resonate with the complexities of modern life. By examining the works of linguists and writers like Raymond Williams, George Orwell, and David Crystal, we see how English serves not only as a tool for communication but as a living record of social evolution. Social movements, digital culture, and global interactions continue to propel language forward, embedding words with fresh connotations that mirror the ideals, conflicts, and curiosities of society.

Ultimately, semantic change is a testament to language's resilience and relevance. As society continues to advance, language will inevitably evolve alongside it, adapting to new ideas and shifting values. Recognizing the social forces that drive this process helps us appreciate the depth of language as a cultural artifact, reminding us that words are not merely vessels for meaning but are intertwined with the collective human experience.

### Referece

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